

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS IN CHINA'S EDUCATION SECTOR

IN 2022-2023

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Foreword

Andrew Seaton, Chief Executive
China-Britain Business Council



We are delighted to continue the delivery of our Comprehensive Higher Education Strategy Service (CHESS) with this report on the major developments in China's education sector in 2022 and 2023, and what they mean for UK education providers.

Education partnerships and relationships with China are of strategic importance to many UK educational institutions. CHESS provides the external expertise, resources, and guidance to help them shape and implement a future-proofed China strategy in an increasingly complex policy context.

This is achieved through a range of reports, analysis and insight, and practical workshops. The programme's emphasis on the key discussion points and policies affecting exchanges and cooperation in education is relevant whether your institution already has an advanced China footprint with a dedicated team on the ground through CBBC's Launchpad or your own office; your focus is on partnerships driving marketing, student recruitment, and transnational education (TNE); or you are seeking to expand your China activities.

Drawing on perspectives from CBBC's Education Team in the UK and China, together with expert advice from professional institutions, Chinese partners, and CBBC's member organisations, CHESS enables you to interpret significant policy changes in the sector and manage an operating environment which may be affected by evolving social, economic, and political developments.

This particular report examines the most significant developments in China's education sector in 2022, which have a material impact on the context for the sector's development not only in 2023 but also in the years to come.

By compiling and interpreting these major developments, the report sheds light on how they contribute to China's national development goals, and also provides insights for UK educational institutions looking to understand the evolving landscape of China's education sector and its implications for their own engagement with the country.

I hope you find this report useful as you work with or within China. If you have any questions about its content, please reach out to us at CBBC.

Andrew Seaton

July 2023

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Introduction

2022 saw several major developments in China’s education sector, such as the implementation of the revised Vocational Education Law, the withdrawal of some of China’s universities from international university rankings, and the release of statements by China’s Ministry of Education (MoE) that indicate coming reform and adjustments in policy direction, all of which the ramifications continue to be felt in 2023 and will continue to have an impact for several years to come. The direct consequences of these developments are numerous — from the limiting of profit-driven international initiatives to the development of new education evaluation standards that better suit China’s needs — but the longer-term significance of the new developments can be more difficult to interpret due to a lack of transparency. Understanding the new developments and their impact can help UK educational institutions better shape their approach to working in China’s education sector.

Despite the lack of transparency, the direction that the Chinese government goes, once understood, is unlikely to change. This is due to China’s nature as a one-party state: the government is unlikely to reverse course on its official policies once announced, and so rapid and unpredictable changes are unlikely. This report, rather than analysing or forming an argument, compiles and interprets major news and government public announcements related to China’s education sector from 2022 and 2023 in order to inform UK educational institutions of the latest happenings, especially those that give an indication of what is to come, that they need to know when working in the China market.



20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China
Photo taken by Xinhua News

Reflecting the three most important subsectors in China’s education sector to watch in the coming years, this report is divided into three sections: “The construction of a high-quality higher education system”, “A new driving force: vocational education”, and “International school market snapshot”. The sections contain summaries of the seven most important news headlines and policy announcements from China’s education sector, each followed by background information and interpretations of what they mean for both UK educational institutions and China’s education sector.

In summary, the Chinese government has not only increased the importance of the education sector in reaching the country’s national development goals, but also applied learnings from international expertise in a way that best suits its needs. In fact, “national rejuvenation” through science and education [1] was emphasised in the report given at China’s 20th National Congress in 2022 which set guidance for China’s social and economic development for the next five years. As such, future developments in China’s education sector, including future approved international exchanges and cooperation, are expected in the short to medium term to be in tune with the tone that it set.

Section 1

The construction of a high-quality higher education system

2022 saw new developments that significantly affected both China's higher education sector and the orientation of the country's scientific research. This section compiles the most significant stories of the year related to higher education and scientific research in China.

Development and opportunities for cooperation

1. The withdrawal of some of China's universities from international university rankings

Source: *China.org.cn*, 11th May 2022

"China's prestigious universities exit international university rankings" [2]

This news article from May 2022 explains that some of China's universities, namely Renmin University of China, Nanjing University, and Lanzhou University, withdrew from participating in international university rankings, with Nanjing University stating specifically that it would, for the time being, cease considering its international ranking among its priorities. While the universities expressed that participation in international rankings, including in related international exchanges and evaluations, has helped them progress, it also led them to prioritise some criteria over others, leading to uneven development and disorderly competition that negatively impacted diversity among higher education institutions. The universities that have withdrawn from international rankings will pursue more diverse criteria instead. [3]




Background and interpretation

The rise of university rankings in China was driven by a demand for greater transparency with regard to universities and their performance and reputation. It was the release of a white paper in 1985 titled **"Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Reforming the Educational System"**, which proposed closer evaluation of the quality of education provided at higher education institutions, that prompted Chinese scholars to explore the implementation of university rankings in the country. China's State Council further fuelled the development of university rankings in the country in 1992 when it called for support from **"all sectors of society"** [4] to participate in the construction of higher education institutions, the cultivation of talents, and the assessment of the level and quality of the education provided.

The Chinese government has provided unprecedented levels of funding and policy support to higher education since the 1990s. The implementation of Project 211 and Project 985 — among China's first initiatives to establish world-class universities and world-renowned research-oriented institutions — in 1995 and 1998, respectively, further motivated some universities to use climbing international rankings as a key development goal in their strategies, and this, in turn, drove considerable growth in research funding, school prestige, and international collaboration. International university rankings played a positive role in the development of a quality assessment method and evaluation system for universities in China, providing guidance and standards to strive for, but the greater benefit was in the growth and development that they promoted.

There was, however, a downside to pursuing university rankings. As alluded to in the article about universities withdrawing from university rankings, universities were encouraged to pursue criteria that will improve their ranking rather than to pursue improvements in areas where it was needed. Changing this behaviour is difficult, as university managers often use rankings as a reference when allocating funds and greenlighting projects and degree programmes. Only by dismantling deep-seated interest mechanisms associated with university rankings can the issue of chasing rankings be addressed. Renmin University of China's withdrawal from international rankings can be attributed to the belief that its academic strengths were severely under-evaluated, as international rankings were seen as inadequate at representing non-STEM-focused universities, and its withdrawal demonstrates the university's desire to have more control over evaluation standards.



Some universities in China have thus developed their own set of criteria for subject evaluations, borrowing some elements from international rankings. And while the aim is to improve talent cultivation and the quality of the country's academic subjects, evaluations must also follow the nation's development goals and make contributions towards economic and social development. China's — and thus China's universities' — aim is to enhance the development of discipline evaluation standards by implementing both Chinese characteristics and international influence, which means setting standards that reflect both China's needs and conditions and international standards.

As of 2023, China has already undertaken five rounds of national subject evaluations that are non-compensatory and operated independently from other organisations. These evaluations are undertaken every four years. Within the wider context of the direction that China's higher education institutions are going — development tailored to local needs and conditions — Renmin University of China's withdrawal served as a symbolic gesture for Chinese universities as a whole and hints at the direction that the development of China's higher education will take.

2. The call for periodic evaluation of first-class universities and disciplines

Source: MoE, 11th February 2022

"Several Opinions on Deeply Promoting the Construction of First-class Universities and First-class Disciplines" [5]

This Opinion,* published by the MoE in February 2022, included a call for universities part of the Double First-class Initiative to be subject to periodic evaluation and inspection by the State Council, the MoE, and the Ministry of Finance.



Background and interpretation

The Double First-class Initiative (DFC), also known as the Double First-class University Plan, is a project that was announced in 2015 with the purpose of elevating the quality and competitiveness of China's higher education through simultaneously developing first-class universities and first-class disciplines. The key focus of developing first-class disciplines is to bring the quality of certain disciplines in participating universities up to world-class, while the development of first-class universities aims to improve participating universities overall — academic disciplines included. By participating, universities gain certain benefits, such as greater autonomy and ease in conducting exchanges and collaboration with other institutions abroad. [6]

Universities and disciplines are selected for the DFC through periodic evaluation rounds. In the first round of DFC evaluations, in January 2017, 465 disciplines from 137 universities were identified as having the potential to be raised to world-class, and a further 47 new disciplines were added after the second round in February 2022. As for universities, there are at present a total of 147 Chinese universities selected as part of the DFC.

The DFC is but the latest initiative implemented to raise the standard of higher education in China. It was preceded by two other projects: Project 211 and Project 985:



*Chinese government departments often publish 'opinions', which are official statements that impact and guide policies, akin to white papers in the UK.



Differences between Project 211/985 and the Double First-Class Initiative

Though the strategic objectives of the DFC are similar to the objectives of the previously existing Project 211 and Project 985 in that they aim to build a cohort of internationally competitive higher education institutions in China, the DFC distinguishes itself in two substantive ways:

Emphasis on universities

VS

Emphasis on disciplines

Project 211 and Project 985 primarily focused on the overall evaluation of universities and recognising their reputation and strengths as a whole, rather than the recognition of specific disciplines. In contrast, the DFC first examines whether a university has strong academic disciplines or majors, and then evaluates the comprehensive strength of the university based on its disciplines.

Rigidity

VS

Fluidity

Project 211 and Project 985 played a crucial role in the advancement of higher education in China for almost two decades, but one of the drawbacks of the initiatives is that many rapidly developing non-Project 211/985 universities did not gain the recognition they deserved, which left many universities dissatisfied. This issue was addressed in the development of the DFC, as it is designed to be dynamic: the selection and recognition of DFC universities is designed to be an ongoing process, with the MoE making it clear that it continues to evaluate DFC universities. The evaluation results, as well as other factors, are taken into consideration during each new round of selections of universities to be designated as DFC, with universities facing the possibility of being removed from the initiative if they do not meet the requirements.



The meaning of the Opinions

Universities are already held to strict standards in order to join the DFC. The release of the Opinions means that participation is not permanent, and that participating universities will need to maintain standards in order to ensure continued participation. This direction implies a focus on the quality of China's higher education institutions rather than the quantity. UK educational institutions will thus want to consider the implications of this direction when planning to develop in the China market.

For more information and about the development history of Double First Class Initiative, please refer to the previous CHES report, "Transnational Education in China Today: History, Trends & the Latest Initiatives".

Contact CBBC

Isabel Xu

Director Knowledge Economy, China
China-Britain Business Council, Shanghai
+86 (0) 21 3100 7900 Ext. 121
Isabel.Xu@cbbc.org

Thomas Clayburn

Senior Adviser, Knowledge Economy
China-Britain Business Council
+44 (0) 20 7802 2026
Thomas.Clayburn@cbbc.org



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China-Britain Business Council
Kings Buildings
Smith Square
London
SW1P 3HQ
+44 (0) 20 7802 2000

www.cbbc.org
enquiries@cbbc.org



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